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# HEALTHY BOUNDARIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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## Understanding Development of Boundaries

The term boundaries is used to describe the limits we set in relationships. These limits generally define “how far we can go with comfort in a relationship” (Whitfield, 1993). Healthy boundaries assist us in setting and maintaining our priorities in life. Healthy personal boundaries also enable us to create intimacy in our relationships with others.

Development of healthy boundaries start in childhood with early secure attachment to a parental figure. Development of a secure parent-child relationship provides the basic building blocks for development of healthy emotional tolerance and emotional coping skills. Through the continued loving, nurturing relationship with a parent figure, a child learns to identify, feel, and tolerate a range of emotional states.

However, this process can be disrupted by poor or rigid parenting, loss of a primary parent, lack of emotional availability of a parent due to mental health or addiction issues, or through exposure to an unsafe environment in the form of exposure to violence or neglect. Long term trauma can lead a child to be hyper vigilant. This constant expectation of harm in turn interferes with a child’s ability to tune into a full range of emotions or to develop appropriate tolerance for sometimes uncomfortable emotions such as anxiety, anger, or sadness.

Without the ability to tolerate strong feelings such as anxiety, anger, or sadness it is difficult to engage in the normal curious exploration of the world that helps a child grow and develop a comfortable sense of self. As one might expect, if you live as if danger might be lurking around every corner, this will have an impact on how you interact with and

judge the behaviours of others. For example, constant anxiety in the presence of others may result in checking behaviours whereby a child has to be very tuned into the surrounding environment at all times to determine level of safety. This might certainly interfere with things such as building skills at school or other competency behaviours because attention is always divided. In turn, without feelings of competency it is difficult to develop a positive sense of self-worth. Over time these feelings of unworthiness are reflected often reflected in the boundaries or lack of boundaries the person sets with others. ❖

## Some Signs of Unhealthy Personal Boundaries in a Relationship

- You are unclear about your preferences and reluctant to voice your wants/desires in a direct way
- You do not notice feelings of unhappiness because are simply in survival mode
- You do more and more for less and less return
- You have few hobbies because you have no attention span for self-directed activity
- You make exception for a person’s behaviours that you would not tolerate in yourself or other people
- You are manipulated by flattery so that you lose objectivity
- You try to create intimacy with people who are not capable of returning your efforts
- You feel hurt and victimized but not angry
- You allow the other person to abuse your family and friends
- You mostly feel afraid and confused
- Tend to commit yourself for as long as the other person needs with no bottom line

(Adapted from *The Therapist*, CAMFT)

## What do Healthy Boundaries look Like?

The following are some examples of ideas and behaviours that let you know that your boundaries are intact and healthy

1. You have a clear sense of preferences and act upon them.
2. Are able to acknowledge your moods and circumstances, while remaining centered
3. Do more in a relationship when that gets results
4. Have excited interest in self-enhancing hobbies and projects
5. Have a personal standard, albeit flexible, that applies to everyone and asks for accountability
6. Appreciate feedback and can distinguish it from attempts to manipulate
7. Pick only partners or friends with whom mutual affection or love is possible
8. Let yourself feel anger, are able to express it and embark upon a program of change
9. Do not let your partner breach or abuse the boundaries of your children and friends
10. Feel comfortable saying no when you feel the other person's expectations exceed your internal or external limits.

(Adapted from *The Therapist*, CAMFT)

## Improving Your Boundaries

Developing healthier boundaries in your relationships can help to lessen the effects of issues such as anxiety and depression and lead to a general improved sense of well-being. In order to improve your boundaries, the first step is to focus on determining the reasons behind the boundary issues that currently exist. Generally, difficulties in dealing with emotions such as anger and anxiety lead us to make reactive rather than proactive decisions regarding how to be in relationships.

Some good workbooks that can assist with gaining a better understanding of emotions and boundaries are listed in the next column. If you are finding that an inability to gauge or set appropriate boundaries are causing problems across a number of different areas of your life it

may also be helpful to engage in some individual or group counseling with the aid of a therapist who specializes in relationship based issues.

## WEBSITES

[www.mentalhelp.net](http://www.mentalhelp.net)

The National Mental Health Consumer Self Help Clearinghouse.

[www.canmat.org](http://www.canmat.org)

Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments

[www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)

The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy

## BOOKS

Boundaries and Relationships. Knowing, Protecting, and enjoying the self. Charles L. Whitfield, M.D. (1993).

The Anger Workbook for Women: How to Keep Your Anger from Undermining your self-esteem, your emotional balance and your relationships. Laura J. Petrcek (2004)

Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life. Scott E. Spradlin (2003)

Where to Draw the Line: How to Set up Healthy Boundaries Every Day. [Anne Katherine](#) (2000)

Boundaries with Kids Workbook . [Dr. Henry Cloud](#) and [Dr. John Townsend](#) (1998)

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